

THE QUR'AN - A CLOSER LOOK

PART 4

MAN AND SOCIETY

There is a clear assumption in the Qur'an that Muslims are able to purify their own Lives, and that of their society, if they try hard enough. This is no doubt why the Book gives at least outline principles for the Islamic State, with its own governmental and legal systems. The life-time of Muhammad and his first four administrative successors, the "Rightly-Guided Khaleefas" (or Caliphs, as we wrongly spell it) are widely seen by Muslims as a Golden Age. The principles of the Qur'an, it is popularly believed, could be and were applied by the early Ummah (Muslim society).

In sober fact, early Muslim writers of their faith's history make very clear the age was far from "golden". Cynics (or realists?) might observe how much less chance there is of the principles working in our far more sophisticated age. But because the Qur'an says they can do, Muslims of the "Fundamentalist" kind feel justified in holding unshaken to the dream, and pressing for its urgent fulfilment by whatever means are necessary.

THE SHAPE OF ISLAMIC GOVERNMENT

Apart from Abu Bakr and Umar, Muhammad never felt much need for advisers. After all, the Qur'an consistently confirmed his own brilliant decision-making. It did not however leave any clear teaching as to what should be done after his death. Even the office of Khaleefah is not described. (Note 1). See for instance 4:58:

"Allah doth command you to render back your Trusts to those to whom they are due; and when ye judge between man and man, that ye judge with justice... O ye who believe! Obey Al'lah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority amongst you. If ye differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and His Messenger, if ye do believe in Allah and the Last Day: that is best, and most suitable for final determination". (Note 2). The Qur'an does not seem to be able to see far into the

future, after the death of Muhammad.

The Arabic word, "**shari'ah**" is used in Surah 45, verse 18:

“Then we put thee on the (right) Way of Religion; so follow thou that Way, and follow not the desires of those who know not.” But here “Way” is use in a general sense, referring to Islam, not in the more technical sense of a law-code, which was not formed till many years

later (Yusuf Ali agrees). One other reference may be given, which could be interpreted as giving some justification for a law-code or Shari'ah. The word rendered “Law” below, (given a capital by Yusuf Ali in 45:18 and in this following verse!) is the related **“shir'ah”**:

“ To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single People, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of all matters in which you dispute” (5:48).

Despite this assurance, in Soonee Islam alone, four schools of legal interpretation have arisen. Admittedly, these are on minor, not fundamental points.

Was it from Surah 41, verse 38, with its reference to **“shura”**, decision by community consultation, that some urging Islamic government today get the idea of **“jumhoori'ah”**, a modified form of democracy run by parliamentarians chosen firstly for their Islamic piety? Since Muhammad gave no instructions even about his immediate successor, **jumhoori'ah** is just one possible arrangement. Another is to appoint a Khaleefah, though now the Muslim world is far too divided for that. Then there is the She'ah way, of giving political authority to religious professionals.

It is possible to argue that the She'ah “theocracy” of Iran is better than many other countries of the world, as far as social equality and public honesty are concerned. One might even argue, better too in sexual morality than many Western countries. Such desirable aspects are however quite obviously maintained by heavy socio/religious pressure. Freedom of moral choice is severely restricted. The weeds of selfishness and indiscipline may be drastically cut above the surface; but Islam here and everywhere has never displayed the power to root them out of people's lives, once for all. This must be partly at least because the Qur'an denies the very existence of these deep roots of evil in human nature. On how this affects economics, see below, and further remarks in Chapter 7.

Surah 3:110 calls Muslims the **“Best of Peoples”**, since they are characterised by **“enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong”**. The literal meaning of the Arabic for “right” and “wrong” is, “known” and “unknown”. By implication, being able to please God is mainly a matter of religious knowledge. The enemy of man’s soul is really ignorance, not any tendency to evil.

The Arabic word for “peoples” here is the plural of **“ummah”**, one of Islam’s most important concepts. The belief in their own Prophet’s community, gathered together by Al’lah himself, and sharply distinguished from all others, gives enormous cohesiveness. Several passages in the Qur’an refer to this ummah. The most comprehensive is perhaps Surah 3:103-104:

“Hold fast, all of you, by the Rope which Allah (stretches out for you), and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude Allah’s favour on you; for you were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace, ye became brethren; and ye were on the brink of the Pit of Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus does Allah make His signs clear to you: that ye may be guided. Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to what is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: they are the ones to attain felicity“.

A few verses further on, we see the other side of the coin:
“O ye who believe!. Take not into your intimacy those outside your ranks: they will not fail to corrupt you” (3:118). The following verse seems to make clear however that 3:118 refers to those who only pretended to be Muslims. But compare 5:51, 57.

Among details of the social structure set out in the Qur’an we have the **zukaah** or religious tax (2:43, 110,177,277, 4:162, 5:55). This has usually been set, though not by the Qur’an itself, at 2.5% of surplus income each year, after deduction of reasonable living expenses.

Less regular charity to the poor and needy (**sadaqah**) is also repeatedly encouraged (see Surah 2:261-273). Muslims claim this was the original Welfare State: it has seldom been well enough organised to merit that title. What it HAS done is to ensure that in what were till recently poor Muslim communities, very few starved. The extended family system (though

this is not specifically a Muslim pattern) has helped here also. Civil or international wars, within or between Muslim countries, and with their tragic refugee problems, have certainly not helped.

Another factor, which constantly threatens the economies of Muslim countries, is the very high birth-rate. The widespread opposition to birth control supposedly has Qur'anic authority; but here is an illustration of how the **ulama** (scholars) can over-rule a commonsense interpretation. The reader may judge for him or herself whether such verses as 6:151 or 17:31 really do forbid contraception (see also Yusuf Ali's comments):

“Kill not your children for fear of want; We shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. Verily the killing of them is a great sin.” In pre-Islamic times, the people of Arabia used to bury unwanted daughters alive (81:8-9) Is this not what the Qur'an is referring to? For if it isn't, and the traditional interpretation is the correct one, a very serious question arises. Is Al'lah unconcerned to see His own people starving? For He is not in practice providing enough food in several countries with soaring populations. Charities and governments, often, ironically, secular ones, have to help out!

Several of the world's major religions forbid usury, which is charging excessive interest on loans. The Qur'an goes much further; it outlaws interest altogether. Or, at least, that is the usual interpretation of the Arabic words of say, 2:275-276,278-279; or 3:130: **“O ye who believe! Devour not usury, double and multiplied; but fear Allah, that ye may really prosper”**. Yusuf Ali, like the Khaleefa Umar, “felt some difficulty in the matter” and so plumps for “usury” instead of “interest”. Umar didn't! Yet “double and multiplied” does seem to imply EXCESSIVE interest. It may be possible to run an economy without charging any interest at all, in a society of religious enthusiasts, or even small groups in general (though even credit unions have to charge some interest). It seems very unrealistic to expect people in a large society, unrelated to each other, to lend money for no advantage to themselves. In the first few centuries of Islam, an interest-free economy may have worked

well enough. Now that larger enterprises require massive capital, it cannot produce enough. Perhaps that is why only the oil and gas revenues have enabled some Muslim countries to make substantial economic progress. An interest-less economy, if it really is advocated by the Qur'an, seems to show once again that the Holy Book could not forecast future conditions very well.

Muslim economists have over the centuries been trying to devise a method of risk-sharing partnerships in business, which adhere to their understanding of the Qur'anic law, but yield a return in most cases to the investor. With the very notable rise in Islamic "Fundamentalism" over recent years, several countries in Africa and the Middle East are seeing the setting up of such "Islamic banks". And Western banks, careful to attract or maintain custom from Muslims, have devised their own "shari'ah compliant" departments and branches. Some years ago we saw an attempt to inaugurate an economic common market in the states of Central Asia, formerly part of the Soviet Union. The long-term results of this and other alliances will show how practical the Qur'an's (?) interest-free economics are, on a larger scale.

There is in fact a laudable wish to make industry less massive in scale, and ecologically harmful. Stewardship of natural resources is an important and admirable part of Islam.

Footnotes:

1. Some time ago, a whole crop of small red stickers caught the eye in British cities. On closer examination, they proved to convey this message: "From 3rd March 1924, until the present year 1994, the world has been without...KHILAFAH. Coming soon, to a country near you, the Islamic State." The 1924 date is of course when the political reformer Kamal Ataturk abolished the Ottoman Empire in Turkey, along with its "Caliph". Muslims believe this was done at the instigation of Western powers. The organisation responsible for the stickers, Hizb-ut-Tahreer, quoted from the Traditions for its mandate:

"Narrated by Al Imam Bukhari, Al Imam Ibn Majah, Al Imam Ahmed and Al Imam Muslim,

on the authority of Abu Hazm: 'I accompanied Abu Huraira for five years and heard him talking about the Prophet (S.A.W.) saying: "The Prophets of Israel ruled over the Children of Israel. Whenever a Prophet died, another Prophet succeeded him, but there will be no Prophet after me. There will soon be Khulaafah (*from Khaleefah*) and they will number many". They asked "What then do you order us?" He said, "Fulfil allegiance to them one after the other. Give them their dues. Verily, Allah will ask them about what He entrusted them with"".

Such Traditions seem to be the only authority for Khaleefahs.

2. According to Al Bukhari, this was revealed in connection with the appointment of a new general of the Muslim armies; so it may not apply to spiritual guidance at all.

QURANIC JUSTICE

What is the Book's teaching on crime and punishment? This is in most aspects quite clear - an exception will be mentioned. On being convicted by a properly constituted court, (this part not in the Qur'an itself, since Muhammad decided cases in his own lifetime), deliberate murderers are normally executed.

But here and in manslaughter (4:92), the offended family may decide to commute the punishment (2:178-179). In general, forgiveness is highly commended (4:92, 17:33, 42:40). As in Judaism, with its "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth", no excess is allowed; the punishment is strictly to fit the crime. This is to prevent private unrestrained vengeance. Thieves are to have their hand(s) cut off, 5:38. Later, the jurists modified this to apply only to serious, not petty, theft. The Qur'an itself makes no such distinction.

Pre-marital sex is strictly forbidden (24:33). Heterosexuals who transgress sexual laws are very clearly to be lashed one hundred times (24:2). Despite this, Umar took it on himself to make the punishment harder. He claimed to have heard Muhammad utter a verse saying married people in adultery should be stoned to death. That is now the official practice where shari'ah is in force. See Chapter 13 for a fuller background. What appears to refer to homosexual and lesbian activity is condemned (27:55-56); but the Qur'an itself specifies the punishment only in the case of women (4:15-16). Rape is not as such mentioned, and has had to be legislated for later.

Witnesses to crime are of vital importance, if justice is to be done. A woman's evidence is worth only half of a man's (2:282). The Qur'an seems to imply this is because women are more likely to get the facts wrong. In other words, that they are less intelligent, or at least have worse memories! The reference in Surah 2 actually seems to refer to commercial contracts. Some scholars claim women's menstruation makes them unreliable at times. Why this should affect witnessing a contract is hard to see.

On the other hand, a woman may not be accused of immoral behaviour by any

outsider, unless there are four witnesses. Such a slanderer should be punished most severely. A husband however may make this kind of accusation, even without any witnesses, providing he is prepared to repeat the charge four times, and follow it with a fifth oath invoking Al'lah's judgement on himself if he is lying. The wife may herself swear the same oath, that her husband is lying, or that she did not do what he accuses her of (24:4-10). In which case, there is no civil punishment; but usually a divorce takes place.

The background to this unusually detailed legislation can be seen in Yusuf Ali's notes. A'ishah, Muhammad's young wife had behaved indiscreetly, and he was for some time not sure whether to divorce her. Eventually the verses of 24:4-10 appeared, to relieve him of his doubts. He decided not to divorce A'ishah.

ATTITUDE TO UNBELIEVERS

The Qur'an clearly intends Islam to be universally dominant. See 9:33, 24:55, 48:4-10 and verse 28, 58:20-21, 61:9. It has absolutely no pluralism or compromise in its nature. Rather, it is to be enforced everywhere, not just as one possible religious option in a free-thinking society. It demands for itself, not simply toleration, but dominance. The Qur'an wishes to exclude, or at least subordinate, all other faiths:

“Therefore, when ye meet the Unbelievers (in fight), smite at their necks; at length, when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind a bond firmly (on them): thereafter is the time for) either generosity or ransom; until the war lays down its burdens. Thus (are ye commanded)”: (47:4)

“Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the Religion of Truth, from among the People of the Book until they pay the Jizyah with willing submission and feel themselves subdued” (9:29; compare 8:38-39, 9:5 and 73, and 66:9).

The Qur'an's attitude to other “Peoples of the Book” (Jews and Christians) was codified later in the Shari'ah. Briefly, they are to second-class citizens in any Islamic state; though they are actually said to be “protected”. They are not expected to contribute the usual **zukaah** but instead pay a (heavier) “**jizyah**” tax, partly to help fund the military defence of

the country, in which they should be allowed no part; for non-Muslims are by definition disloyal. Shari'ah makes them also pay land-tax.

Under Islamic rule, in practice both these “**dhimmi**” (client) communities have been treated sometimes with indulgence, but alas often with serious injustice. There is nothing in the Qur'an to say how adherents of other, non-Book religions should be treated; if they are still alive. (2:193). Again, their treatment has varied considerably. See 9:5, where Yusuf Ali gives “**Pagans**” a capital letter, apparently to distinguish them as a people from the Jews and Christians.

What of those who leave Islam to join another religion? Their fate is not as clearly commanded in the Qur'an itself, as by both Sunnah and Shari'ah it has since been made. The Qur'an in several places promises such apostates Divine wrath in the Hereafter (2:217, 4:137, 16: 106-109), Two other passages that say they are to be killed now, are 4:89-90 and 5:33, But these refer to those who not only leave, but take up arms against the Muslim cause. Surah 9, verse 5 refers only to Pagans. Yet the legalists do have justification outside the Qur'an, for the Traditions report that Muhammad did command the execution of apostates, simply for leaving Islam. (Saheeh Al Bukhari, Vol. 9, nos. 57-58, page 45).

How all this can be reconciled with verses like 2:256 or 10:99, which say there is to be “**no compulsion in religion**” is far from clear. Perhaps, in context of these verses, the freedom to choose is in one direction only? It is acceptable not to join Islam; but quite unacceptable, to leave it.

There is a slight difference between the Qur'an's attitude to the Jews, and to the Christians. The Qur'an became strongly hostile to the Jews, once it became clear the great majority were not going to accept Muhammad's claims to prophet-hood, and indeed had begun to scorn and try to undermine him.

Verses like 3:113-115 might seem to read rather favourably. But as Yusuf Ali points out, they probably refer only to the minority of Arab “People of the Book” who later did

embrace Islam. Compare 3:199, 28:53 and 29:47; but contrast 3:28, 5:54, 75-83!

“O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor: for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts) lest ye swerve, and if ye distort justice or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that you do” (4:135)

Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion: He instructs you, that you may receive admonition” (15:90) The Qur'an, here and in 5:9, 6:152, 26:227, 47:42, exhorts

Muslims to practice “**justice**”. But it reserves for them full rights to define what “justice” is.

In the case of non-Muslims in an Islamic country, this falls far short of the United Nations Declaration, or other human rights documents of the modern world.

PROPERTY AND CHARITY

Laws of property and inheritance are also very important in any society. In the country into which the Qur'an came, might was very much right. Inter-tribal warfare was frequent, and often sparked off by just such issues. The Qur'an legislates for this too, in some detail. For the proper disposing of fixed property and other belongings, at least verbal wills should be made (2:180) and written contracts for debt (2:282).

Widows are specially provided for in 2:240. Surah 4 also has much legislation, especially on inheritance distribution to widowers and children. Male children get twice as much as females, since men are responsible for the upkeep of women. Aged parents too are not forgotten (17:23-24) and even brothers and sisters, in the right circumstances (4:7-9, 11-12, 179). Orphans receive special mention in Surahs 2 and 4 especially. Muhammad had been one himself.

The Qur'an also legislates for distribution of booty, in 8:1 and 41; to compensate widows and orphans of the slain warriors of Islam. Property taken without fighting (mainly from the Jews) is dealt with in 59:7-8. Muhammad had the final say in this; part went to himself.

Charity, especially in secret, is highly commended in many places (e.g. 76:8-9). The

Arabic word “**waqf**” (plural, “**auqaaf**”) refers to endowments which can be given to needy people or other good causes such as hospitals, schools or mosques. Since “**waqf**” can include one’s own family, the effect, as with modern tax-free inheritance systems, has sometimes been to concentrate wealth, and create a rich class in society. On several occasions, this situation was righted by Muslim rulers, who confiscated and redistributed wealth.

Among “inheritances” in early Islam, were captured women. The Qur’an forbids their being passed on from one Muslim to another casually, as wives or concubines. That introduces the whole question of marriage and divorce, on which the Qur’an is very comprehensive. A new section is needed to cover this properly.

MARRIAGE, FAMILY AND DIVORCE

The Qur'an exhorts all to marry. It is against the idea of remaining single, and regards celibacy for religious reasons as unnecessary and undesirable (57:27 - but contrast 5:82, which presumably refers to monks: an apparent inconsistency.). In order that both married and as yet unmarried may be preserved from temptation, it urges both sexes, but especially women, to dress, speak and behave modestly. No-one is to enter private apartments without asking permission. See Surah 24, verses 27-31. But the total seclusion of women, which is practiced in some countries, or the "burqah" garment, covering all the body, including the face, are not prescribed by the Qur'an, except (possibly?) for Muhammad's wives (33:32-33, 53).

Women are regarded by the Qur'an as equal to men in God's regard: in daily life, subordinate. 4:124, 16:97 and 33:25 emphasize the spiritual equality - though Muhammad is reported to have said there would be relatively few women in Paradise. 2:228 and 4:34 make equally clear the subordination in everyday life. One's mother is to be revered as the source of one's very life (4:1, 31:14); but wives are to be under their husband's control, and before marriage, daughters under their father's authority.

The Qur'an regularises, or else abolishes, several pre-Islamic pagan customs on marriage, divorce, and the treatment of women and of orphans. See for example 33:4. This verse refers to former pagan customs. The first part, to unjust treatment of wives. The second, to treating adoption as giving full legal rights to the family property - now disallowed by the Qur'an. Marriage is forbidden between very close family members, as in many societies and religions. Details can be found in Surah 4, whose 24th verse also says it is not adultery to take a married woman captive in war and marry her. Ordinary Muslim men (Muhammad is different) may have up to four wives at one time, providing they are treated equally (Surah 4:3 - but 4:129 says this is impossible!) Some Muslims nowadays take it that a reference here also to orphans in war in 4:3 means this verse no longer applies; they say monogamy is

better. (Note 1)

“If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if you fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or a captive that your right hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice” (4:3)

“Dealing justly” in this case has a somewhat legal sense, covering provision of food, clothing, conjugal and inheritance rights, rather than emotional involvement. For the Qur'an sees marriage initially as a contract, with services provided mutually. It may be terminated by the man, if he feels the woman is not fulfilling her side of it. (one surah, number 65, is entitled “Divorce”). This was clarified by later Islamic law as to be done by repetition of a formula at three different times before official witnesses.

Both divorce, and the number of women up to four that a man marries, are really in his control alone, in purely Qur'anic teaching at least. In some Muslim countries, lack of income, or other influences, have made life-long marriage and monogamy the rule rather than the exception. But by modern standards women's emotional and security needs seem not to be fully recognised by the Qur'an. A woman may not divorce her husband without his agreement, as he can her (4:128). She does have the safeguard of being given a dowry, though this is not usually large. When divorced, she keeps the dowry, unless she has returned it meantime to her husband (4:4).

Four months cooling-off and waiting period is imposed; because a pregnant wife cannot be divorced till she has borne (2:226) or weaned (65:1-4) her baby. This is because in Qur'anic law, children belong to their father, after they reach a certain age. The Qur'an assumes the divorced woman will remarry, or return to her natal family. Islam has no place for unattached females.

While married, a woman may be beaten (Yusuf Ali's adjective “lightly” is not in the Qur'anic text, but is defined by Tradition), or even banished from her husband's bed until she repents of what he considers her bad behaviour and attitude (4:34). Remarriage to the same woman is possible, but not till she has been married and divorced by someone else (2:230 -

see Chap. 12).

A Muslim man may marry a “**chaste**” Jewish or Christian woman, before she converts to Islam, and remain married to her even if she maintains her religion. The same permission is not given to Muslim women to marry non-Muslims (5:5). The reason is clearly that Muslim husbands set the religious boundaries in their families, and the religious allegiance of children.

“And among His signs is this, that he created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts: verily in that are signs for those who reflect” (30:21). Or see 4:19, **live with them on a footing of kindness and equity**”. It would be entirely wrong to accuse the

Qur'an of reducing marriage to a business. A man can expect children from his wife; but wives are also to be companions (16:72). The Book recognises and encourages love between the partners, and regards divorce as not desirable; it sets up a family-based arbitration service (4:35).

Although the Qur'an gives women no independent right to divorce, it does advocate the fair treatment of wives who no longer have their husband's love, or love him. Such verses as 4:128 allow her to at least broach the subject, and encourage the couple to come to “**an amicable settlement**”. The following verse exhorts men not to “**turn away (from a woman) altogether, so as to leave her (as it were) hanging in the air**”. In other words, do not leave her destitute, but support her until she remarries or is otherwise provided for.

Muhammad had his own special provisions, as described in Surah 33, especially verses 50-52. He was not restricted to four wives or concubines, nor was he obliged to treat them all with perfect equality (33:51). His “consorts”, as Yusuf Ali calls them, were to be treated with great respect by the Muslims and are urged in the Qur'an to behave modestly and with the dignity befitting their high station. Muhammad was on the whole an affectionate man, if not slightly indulgent to his wives. Tradition records he sometimes helped them with domestic tasks. He never did divorce any; but a special revelation on one notable occasion

when they accused him of unfair treatment, contains a threat they COULD be abandoned and replaced (Surah 66: but contrast 33:52, perhaps a slightly earlier surah). Umar's influence in this and other things, will be examined later.

The multiple wives of early Islam were partly the result of men being killed in the Holy Wars. It will be appropriate now to survey the subject of "**jihaad**" as it is developed in the Qur'an.

Footnotes:

1. By contrast, today's resurgent "fundamentalist" organisations in Muslim countries have made it part of their policy, in keeping with the Qur'an and Muhammad's practice, to encourage men to take more than one wife. In some places, money is even being given to finance this.

MISCELLANEOUS TEACHINGS

It seems fairly clear that Islam underwent a considerable change of direction, possibly even of character, once Muhammad was accepted by the citizens of Medina as their leader. Before that, he had met with general scorn and rejection, believed in by comparatively few people, and only one, his uncle and main protector, Abu Talib, of any influence. True, his qualities and reliability, with the firm assurance God had spoken to him, had won an amazing commitment among the small group of Muslims..

The whole nature of leadership among Arabs may well confirm the opinion of H.A.R.,Gibb (*“Islam”*, Oxford University Press), that Muhammad had a political purpose right from the start. In any case, like most great leaders, he was not only a strategist, but a tactician also. Surahs of earlier times are characterised by wonderful economy and force of language, poetic form, and inspirational spirit.. Surahs 92-97, 100-104, and 107 may be taken as typical examples of the early Qur'an. Note the quite different tone of the much later Surah 98, which is interspersed in the series.

THE INSTITUTION OF JIHAAD

After Muhammad's removal to Medina under persecution, and in fear of attacks from his tribe and other pagans, he took the fateful decision to solve his problems by fighting. The first skirmish, known as Badr, was a victory. This confirmed Muhammad's belief that Al'lah was favouring his actions, and despite one subsequent reverse, he never wavered till he had subdued all his enemies in the area.. Surahs began regularly to appear, promising the believers ultimate victory despite suffering and losses, rebuking and threatening the fair weather followers (e.g. 43:15-16).

Later, the promise of immediate Paradise for maytrs in the cause (2:154, 3:157-158, 169-179, 22:58-59) was supplemented by revelations of the booty to be obtained while still alive. No wonder the Muslims were hard to defeat! The institution of **jihaad** was therefore of crucial importance to the shaping and expansion of Islam. Some Muslims today interpret it in

a non-military sense, as intellectual struggle only. The Ahmadee (though they are not recognised as Muslims by others) are very strong on this emphasis; perhaps because they have been the victims of the forceful kind! True, “striving” is the basic meaning of the Arabic word. But it is beyond any doubt that the Qur'an foresees a continuing expansion of Islam, and that this would be accomplished by force of arms as well as in other ways.

Yusuf Ali, as “modernist” and apologist, rather predictably plays this down, in his note on 9:20. But Surah 8, which is a kind of lesson from the victorious battle of Badr, makes clear the essentially military character of the concept. Read especially verse 38 to the end. Surah 2, which is a long summary of the main duties of Muslims, inevitably includes its own clear references to military **jihaad**; 2:190-193.

There are several other references, some of which insist the Muslims should not begin hostilities. They are commanded to keep oaths of peace (2:190,224). But it is not difficult to turn defence into attack by propaganda. See 4:75-76,9:4-5. How else could Islam have spread its rule so widely in such a short space of time? The use of words like “liberation” or “defence of rights” as an excuse to begin fighting, is well known throughout history; and not just Muslim history.

Two later surahs, numbers 2 and 4, contain many scathing references to the “hypocrites”. While Islam's victory was in the balance, many of Muhammad's own tribe tried to keep in with both him and his enemies. As Muhammad's power grew, it became politic to join Islam. Many did, who were not wholly behind its cause. Such people are threatened with eternal damnation. See 2:8-10, 14-18, 204-205, and 4:137-140,145-146.

An interesting question, which deserves fuller treatment than we can give here, is whether the Qur'an encourages Holy War for the relief of people from injustice as such. My own assessment is that it is only a very minor theme, which has been made into a major one by modern advocates of Islam. No doubt Muhammad did fight to free the Muslims from the “**cruelty**” of the Quraishi idolators, as well as their false beliefs and worship practices.

Whether he intended to set the whole world free from social injustice, is quite another matter. It was later scholars and law-makers who proclaimed Islam as the best method of social revolution. But such revolutions are essentially to establish Islam as politically supreme. A constantly improving society is expected to flow from this, as an almost inevitable result.

The oft-occurring Qur'anic word “**zulm**” has a literal meaning, “withholding what is due” (to God, in submission). By extension, it can also mean “injustice” or “perversity” as well as “cruelty”. The term is therefore applied to the actions of all false rulers and governments, and is widely used today in the Muslim world as a protest against Western capitalist, or Communist, exploitation. But essentially, the perpetrators of injustice harm their own eternal souls (3:117, 4: 61-64, 9:68-70, etc.). Al'lah does them no wrong, and gives them no excuse (30:9-10).

Military **jihad**, like other parts of the Qur'an's teaching, reinforces the strong impression that it is an age-bound Book. After the demise of the **Khilaafah**, indeed far earlier, since the death of Ali, no one leader has commanded the obedience of all the faithful. No person or even group of ulama has recognised authority to tell the whole Muslim community what are or are not the right conditions for declaring **jihad**. This means of course that geographically limited “jihad” have been common in history. They have been instigated and pursued for various reasons, not always clearly connected with the defence or advancement of Islam. “Jihad!” gives a rallying cry or excuse for dictators, aspiring politicians, and increasingly, an excuse to dominate and even try to exterminate non-Muslim minorities.

THE OTHER JIHAAD

In the less aggressive sense of “striving”, the Qur'an has surprisingly little explicitly urging the pursuit of individual saintliness. But it does contain many passages commanding restraint of injustice, exploitation, luxury, and animal appetites generally: “greater **jihad**”.

(3:14,5:87,104:2-3 are a few examples). It enjoins strict honesty in commercial and personal dealings, and the honouring of contracts (83:1-6).

“**Give full measure when ye measure, and weigh with a balance that is straight...**” (17:35). The Muslim community may still be somewhat more honest in business than many others.

The Qur'an forbids waste, and the squandering of wealth, long before ecology became a fashionable concern (7:31, 17:26-27).

Islam's religious disciplines, such as going on pilgrimage, paying the **zukaah**, the daily prayer, and perhaps especially the fasting in Rumadaan, are not for those who want an undemanding religion. They cost something. This **jihad** against self-indulgence inculcates self-discipline and self-denial (as well as a very strong community spirit). It is remarkable how Muslim children below the age of responsibility are anxious to begin fasting, at least for part of the time required.

For adults, fasting means no food, drink, tobacco or sex, from early dawning till near darkness. This month of Rumadaan has certain built-in anomalies. The dates rotate throughout our solar year, because it is celebrated on the lunar calendar. In certain years, Muslims living in the very far North would be required to fast for most of the 24 hours of each day. Those in the same years living very far South would get away with almost no fasting at all. A gap seems to have appeared in the Qur'an's Divine knowledge, concerning geography outside the tropics.

Some, but far from all the details of the **Hujj** (main Pilgrimage) as practiced today, are found in the Qur'an. 2:158 mentions the little hills of Safa and Marwa, between which pilgrims are to journey, as well as walking around the Sacred House (the **Ka'aba**). But drinking from the “holy” well of Zamzum, stoning the Devil, kissing the Black Stone: these are all superstitious additions not authorized by the Qur'an.

Even some practices which ARE based on the Qur'an, date from much earlier. They

were taken over from the religions of the Arab tribes. The very name “**Al'lah**” itself is not original. The chief god of pagan Arabia had that (rather general) name. The **Ka'aba**, around which the holiest mosque of Islam stands today, had been a place of idolatrous worship for at least seven centuries before the Qur'an appeared. Pilgrimages were made to it from other parts of the country, and the journeying between the hills of Safa and Marwa (approved in the Qur'an), as well as the ceremony of stoning a pillar representing the Devil or evil, were both part of that pre-Islamic religion.

The church historian Epiphanius tells us that the Ebionites (a Christian heresy found in nearby Syria, if not in Arabia) observed circumcision, were opposed to celibacy, enjoined Jerusalem as their **kiblah** (direction to pray: as did Muhammad for 12 years), prescribed ceremonial washings, and allowed oaths by certain natural objects such as clouds, signs of the zodiac, oil, the winds, etc.

The Sabaeans, who appear by name in the Qur'an, prayed several times a day, and fasted for a month too. Here we make bold to suppose the “**Sabians**” of 2:62, 5:69, and 22:17 are not the very small community whose remains have been found in what is now Southern Iraq, but a larger and somewhat different group, living earlier in South Arabia. This seems justified by Yusuf Ali's own notes, to Surah 27:22, and Surah 34, verse 15. These locate the city of Saba' in Yemen, then part of southern Arabia, and recount a disaster in which its inhabitants were overwhelmed by a flood caused by the breaching of a dam. Yet inconsistently, his note 76 then tries valiantly to persuade us to choose the group in Iraq! Maybe this is because he considers they were more contemporary, less heretical, and more worthy the semi-approval given them by the Qur'an? But even if the reference is to the small southern Iraqi group, the approval may well relate only to those who became Muslims.

“NEITHER JEW NOR CHRISTIAN”

Qur'anic verses like 2:125-127 state that Abraham and his son Isma'eel first offered worship at the Ka'aba in Mecca. There is indeed other evidence that the Arab people are

physically descendants of **Isma'eel** (Ishma'el). The further claim, that Muslims are also the descendants of Abraham spiritually, may well have come from those referred to in some Islamic writings as the “**Haneef**”. The claim is that these were believers in the One God, and rejecters of idolatry, but that like Abraham their progenitor, they were “neither Jew nor Christian” (3:67; see also 2:135 and other references). Historically, this can hardly be denied, since the Judaic/Israeli religion did not begin till the time of Jacob, later called Isra'el, the grandson of Abraham . But of course, these Qur'anic verses are claiming much more than this: that Islam is the one true, unchanged religion, from Abraham's time!

Muslim historians name six of these “haneefs”, four living in Mecca, and three of them, relatives through blood or marriage of Muhammad. Ibn Ishaq, earliest of the Prophet's biographers, details the later history of these four. None ended his days as a Muslim. Three embraced Christianity. The fourth joined neither religion. But there is no conclusive evidence of the Haneefs existing as a separate and formal religious group in Arabia before the time of the Qur'an. The Book itself uses the word “**haneef**” only in describing Abraham Himself, as the “true worshipper”.

Both Judaism and Christianity have a special day of rest as well as worship each week. The Jews observe this from Friday evening to Saturday evening, being the seventh day of their week. Most Christians claim that, as the calendar has changed several times, and no-one now knows on which particular day God “rested” (that is, stopped creating), the day of the week is not as vitally important as the rule of one in seven. For this and other reasons, they changed the Sabbath to Sunday. Both the “Testaments” however do seem to teach a weekly holy day.

The Qur'an has no such instruction. It knows about the Sabbath (7:163-166, 16:124), but seems to be saying, as with the forbidding of some foods, that God was actually punishing the Jews in giving them this special day of rest and worship!

What the Qur'an does command (Surah 62, verses 9 to 11) is that the Muslims should

not neglect to meet all together for prayers on a Friday. Afterwards, they are free to continue their work. Friday is not a “Sabbath” for Muslims. This of course does not mean that they should go to work seven days a week; simply that there is no command from God to stop them doing so. Even on the pilgrimage to Mecca, there is nothing to forbid the believers engaging in business (2:198).

RACE RELATIONS AND SLAVERY

Islam is probably in practice the major religion least spoiled by racial division or prejudice. The Arabs may harbour real feelings of superiority, but perhaps that is because of their prominence in Islamic history, or adherence to orthodoxy, than for racial reasons as such. However, titles like Syed (Said, Sayyad) or Shaikh (Sheikh) are a claim to be descended from the Prophet himself, or from some (lighter-skinned) Arab conqueror, and give considerable prestige. Racial equality is not mentioned in the Qur'an in so many words, but there is some emphasis on the unity of mankind, as springing from one Creator. Typical verses are 30:22 and 49:13.

The aged Abu Bakr, the first Khaleefah, gave a good example by freeing an early black slave disciple, Bilal: though the Qur'an says nothing about slavery as an institution. 24:33 does encourage Muslims to free their own slaves, probably after some payment (see Yusuf Ali's bracketed addition). In other cases, the slave is to be given money as well as his freedom. Many of the original Muslims were slaves who had fled their masters, and the strong opposition suffered by Muhammad was partly because Islam's teaching of a religious brotherhood undermined the social structure of tribal Arabia. (Sadly, however, a form of slavery still exists in some Muslim countries, notably Mauritania, Sudan and Niger).

USING THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an was never intended merely as a book for silent study or theological systematising. A vital part of its power, as we hinted in the Introduction, is in its recitation aloud. Neal Robinson's fascinating “*Discovering the Qur'an*” (S.C.M., 1996) reveals the

intricacy of its verbal arrangement, which includes the most sophisticated rhythms, as well as rhymes. (Note 1). It is also why orthodox Muslims insist the Book cannot be translated, for it then becomes much less than it is, in its original form.

The Hadeeth (Saheeh Al Bukhari, Vol. 6, pages 491-496, Muhammad Muhsin Khan's translation) recommends the recitation of certain surahs, and promises a blessing for this. They are: Surah 1, Al Fatihah; Surah 2, Al Baqarah; Surah 18, Al Kahf; Surah 48, Al Fatah; Surah 112, Al Ikhlas; Surah 113, Al Falaq; Surah 114, An Nas. Two verses of Surah 2 may be recited before sleeping.

Other parts of the Qur'an are particularly precious to Muslims, at crisis points of their lives. For instance, at the approach of death, parts of Surah Ya Seen, number 36, may be read. And before and after someone's passing, it is customary for the whole Qur'an to be read through in what are called the "Qul" (Recite) and "Khatima" (Completion) ceremonies. This is with the hope that the dead person's sins will be forgiven. Muhammad himself is said to have sanctioned the practice.

It has become customary for believers to make appropriate responses when certain parts of the Qur'an are read aloud. These may consist either in verbal affirmation, or bowing the body in submission.

In "Folk Islam", parts of the Qur'an are written on paper and used for charms or even curses. For example, Surah 26, verse 80. This kind of superstition, common in other religions too, of course finds no support in the Book. However, even within the Qur'an itself, there may be some evidence of the fear of black magic. Many commentators on Surahs 113 and 114 say they are Muhammad's prayers for the release of a curse put on him by a witch.

See **CONCLUSIONS**.

In coming to the end of our summary of the Qur'an's main teachings, even some Muslim readers may be surprised at how much of their religion, as practiced today, has no

clear basis in the foundation Document. This applies not only to mystical or superstitious practices, but more generally to the enormous body of Tradition and Shari'ah law that has been built up since the time of Muhammad.

“This day have I perfected your religion for you” Exactly what does that very famous statement in Surah 5:3 mean, if the later Traditions and Shari'ah are an essential addition? Significantly, the word in this verse translated “religion” is derived from the Arabic “**deen**”, which refers to the religion as a whole, including personal and social behaviour, rather than just “**imaan**”, faith. Yet almost no Muslim believes the Qur'an, on its own, covers every aspect of Islamic behaviour.

Footnote:

1) An earlier Western scholar, Theodor Noldeke, pointed out that these rhymes are sometimes achieved by including unsuitable or even grammatically incorrect words.